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DEVICE FOR TREATING A PACKAGING MATERIAL BY MEANS OF UV
RADIATION

5 TECHNICAL FIELD

The present invention relates to a device for treating a packaging material by means of UV radiation.

UV radiation has long been used in a wide range of applications. In the food industry, for example, it is
10 commonly used for disinfecting or sterilizing packaging material, or for surface treating the food products themselves.

UV radiation is also used for disinfecting work environments.

15 The device according to the present invention may conveniently be used, though not exclusively, in a packaging material sterilizing unit of a pourable food product packaging machine, to which application reference is made in the following description purely by
20 way of a non-limiting example.

BACKGROUND ART

Various types of machines are known for packaging various types of pourable food products, such as fruit juice, wine, tomato sauce, pasteurized or long-storage
25 (UHT) milk, etc.

Such machines have different characteristics, depending on the type of package used, e.g. packages

made of strip or sheet material, cups, bottles, tubs, etc.

One of the best-known packaging machines is the one marketed under the registered trademark Tetra Brik® -
5 referred to purely by way of a non-limiting example - in which the packages or packs are formed from a continuous tube of packaging material defined by a longitudinally sealed web.

The packaging material has a multilayer structure
10 comprising a layer of paper material covered on both sides with layers of heat-seal material, e.g. polyethylene. In the case of aseptic packages for long-storage products, such as UHT milk, the packaging material comprises a layer of barrier material, e.g.
15 aluminium foil, which is superimposed on a layer of heat-seal plastic material, and is in turn covered with another layer of heat-seal plastic material eventually defining the inner face of the package and therefore contacting the food product.

20 To produce aseptic packages, the web of packaging material is unwound off a reel and fed through a sterilizing unit, in which it is sterilized, for example, by immersion in a bath of liquid sterilizing agent, such as a concentrated solution of hydrogen
25 peroxide and water.

Alternatively, or in addition to being treated with

a liquid sterilizing agent, the web of packaging material may be treated by exposure to one or more sources of UV electromagnetic radiation, as described, for example, in European Patent Application EP-A-919246.

5 Downstream from the sterilizing unit, the web of packaging material is maintained in an aseptic chamber, in which it is dried, folded into a cylinder, and sealed longitudinally to form a continuous vertical tube. In other words, the tube of packaging material forms an
10 extension of the aseptic chamber, is filled continuously with the pourable food product, and is then fed to a forming and (transverse) sealing unit for producing the individual packages, and in which the tube is gripped between pairs of jaws and sealed transversely to form
15 aseptic pillow packs.

The pillow packs are separated by cutting the sealed portions in between, and are then fed to a final folding station where they are folded mechanically into the finished form.

20 Packaging machines of the type described above are used widely and satisfactorily in a wide range of food industries for producing aseptic packages from strip packaging material. Performance of the sterilizing unit, in particular, amply ensures conformance with
25 regulations governing the sterility of the packages.

Within the industry, however, a demand exists for

further improvement, particularly as regards the safety of UV devices, which may be used for both disinfecting and sterilizing various types of packaging material, such as strip and sheet material, cups, bottles, tubs, etc.

UV devices substantially comprise a UV radiation source housed in a casing and protected at the front by a screen made of material resistant and permeable to UV radiation. In commonly marketed devices, the screen is defined by a quartz plate.

Though perfectly suitable in terms of physical-chemical properties, quartz has various drawbacks. In particular, it is extremely expensive. Moreover, a quartz screen is fragile and, if broken, tends to form extremely hard, sharp fragments. In known machines, the UV device, and therefore the quartz screen, is so located as to be protected against impact, so that the risk of it breaking and leaving trace fragments of quartz on the packaging material is highly unlikely.

Nevertheless, at present, the possibility cannot be entirely excluded. Though unlikely, breakage may be caused by anomalous vibration or thermal stress, by flaws in the structure of the material, by accidental forcing or impact during assembly, or by a combination of any of these.

Another drawback of quartz in this type of

application is its tendency to dirty easily in normal operating conditions, and where it is extremely difficult, expensive, or even impossible to clean, whereas replacement is far from cheap.

5 Quartz also has the further drawback of any flaws, cracks, dirt, etc. locally affecting its optical properties, thus possibly resulting in uneven irradiation of the material being treated.

DISCLOSURE OF INVENTION

10 It is an object of the present invention to provide a device for UV irradiation treatment of a packaging material, designed to eliminate the aforementioned hazards typically associated with known devices.

According to the present invention, there is
15 provided a device for treating a packaging material by means of UV radiation, the device comprising a source of said radiation, and a screen for protecting said source and which is interposed between the source and the material for treatment; characterized in that said
20 screen comprises a film of a polymer resistant and permeable to said UV radiation.

Using a film of a polymer resistant and permeable to UV radiation provides for meeting the requirements of chemical/physical compatibility with the workplace, and
25 at the same time for eliminating the drawbacks typically associated with quartz plates.

In particular, the flexibility of the polymer

material substantially eliminates any risk of tearing caused by vibration or thermal stress. And, even in the highly unlikely event of the film tearing, no fragments are formed, thus making the material perfectly suitable
5 for use in the food industry.

Moreover, a film of polymer material is much cheaper than a quartz plate, and can therefore be replaced quickly and cheaply in the event of soiling.

Finally, in the event of flaws in the structure,
10 i.e. on the surface, of the polymer film, uniform irradiation of the material being treated is unaffected, the polymer film being by nature slightly translucent and therefore still capable of ensuring adequate UV radiation diffusion.

15 In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, the polymer is fluorinated or, better still, completely fluorinated and in the perfluoroalkoxy (PFA) class.

More preferably, the fluorinated polymer is an MFA, the characteristics of which are particularly favourable
20 in terms of UV radiation transmission, even, for example, in the case of UV radiation with a 222nm wavelength, as described in the aforementioned European Patent Application EP-A-919246.

In one possible embodiment of the invention, the
25 polymer film is supported between substantially rigid grilles.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

A preferred, non-limiting embodiment of the present invention will be described by way of example with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Figure 1 shows a section of a device for treating
5 packaging material in accordance with the invention;

Figure 2 shows a partly exploded view in perspective of the Figure 1 device:

BEST MODE FOR CARRYING OUT THE INVENTION

Number 1 in the accompanying drawings indicates as
10 a whole a device for treating a packaging material 2 for producing packages of a pourable food product.

By way of a non-limiting example, the packaging material is a sheet material.

Material 2 is fed continuously in known manner
15 along a path P in a plane α of the material.

Material 2 may be defined by a different type of material, such as a tub, cup, bottle, etc.

Device 1 extends crosswise to material 2, i.e. perpendicularly to path P and parallel to plane α , and
20 comprises an elongated outer casing 3 open on the side facing material 2 so as to form a window 4 defined by a peripheral flange 5. Device 1 also comprises a UV radiation source 6 housed longitudinally in casing 3, which is provided in conventional manner with a lining 7
25 of reflecting material.

Source 6 emits UV radiation of a wavelength, for example, of 222 nm.

The device also comprises a protective screen 8 fixed at the front to flange 5 so as to close window 4.

According to the present invention, screen 8 comprises a film 9 of a polymer material resistant and permeable to the UV radiation emitted by source 6.

The polymer material may be of any type, providing it is transparent to UV radiation ($T \geq 80\%$) and resistant to said UV radiation in the operating conditions and for the time period between two successive replacements.

The polymer material may, for example, be in the polyolefin group, such as PE or PP.

Depending on the different resistance to UV radiation of different possible types of polymer film, provision may be made for appropriate, programmed, periodic replacement of film 9 of polymer material, so as to ensure constant mechanical and optical properties of the film.

Replacement may be made, for example, either at given times, or continuously, using a strip of polymer material moving continuously between two appropriately powered reels.

In a preferred embodiment, the material is a fluorinated polymer, or a completely fluorinated polymer in the perfluoroalkoxy (PFA) class, and even more preferably is an MFA, e.g. the MFA produced by AUSIMONT® under the trade name HYFLON® MFA.

Film 9 is conveniently 20 to 200 μm thick, is preferably 40 μm , 50 μm , or 100 μm thick, and is in the form of a flexible, slightly translucent film capable of diffuse transmission of a fraction of the incident
5 radiation.

Though film 9, by virtue of its physical characteristics, may be used alone and simply fixed along the edges to flange 5, it is preferably interposed between two substantially rigid metal supporting grilles
10 10, which are fixed to flange 5 by means of respective peripheral frames 11, and provide for protecting and keeping the film flat.

Film 9 has excellent characteristics in terms of transmittance and resistance to ageing under UV
15 radiation, as shown in the following examples.

EXAMPLE 1

A 50 μm thick film of Hyflon[®] MFA was exposed to 300KJ/cm² UV radiation of 222 nm wavelength for 800 hours. After exposure, the film showed no visible
20 alteration, and 90% transmittance referred to the above 222 nm wavelength.

EXAMPLE 2

A 100 μm thick film of Hyflon[®] MFA was exposed to 300KJ/cm² UV radiation of 222 nm wavelength for 800
25 hours. After exposure, the film showed no visible alteration, and 82% transmittance referred to the above

222 nm wavelength.

Film 9 does not tear in the event of anomalous thermal stress or vibration, and, even if torn by accidental impact, which is substantially impossible in
5 working conditions, does not produce fragments.

Film 9 is also much cheaper than a conventional quartz plate.

Clearly, changes may be made to the present invention without, however, departing from scope of the
10 invention itself.

In particular, the screen may be made of a different polymer material, e.g. PE, PP, PFA or many others.

Also, grilles 10 may be different or even dispensed
15 with.